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### J. Carter Wood, *Violence and crime in nineteenth-century England: The shadow of our refinement, London and New York, Routledge*

2004, 204 p., ISBN 0-415-32905-1

Clive Emsley



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- 1 Our understanding of inter-personal violence, like our understandings of other social relations, changes over time. In the contemporary British popular press, among some social commentators and politicians assertions are commonly made about an increasing tide of violence sweeping across the country. This may be true, but proving it, as opposed to asserting it, is impossible. John Carter Wood's book makes a valuable contribution to the debate about violence in Britain, or more specifically England. He argues, persuasively, that there was a significant shift in the construction and understanding of inter-personal violence in the period from roughly 1820 to 1870, and that this new construction and understanding is largely that one that informs our modern perspective.
- 2 Wood establishes his theoretical stance on a thoughtful amalgamation of ideas drawn from Elias and Foucault. His principal empirical sources are assize materials in the National Archives and a wide range of Victorian books and periodical literature. Constantly interweaving his theoretical position with the primary source material, Wood suggests that in the early nineteenth century two understandings of violence began to confront each other. On the one hand there was the new 'civilized' perspective largely rooted in the shifting, increasingly refined middle and upper class. This championed

rationality and self-restraint in human relations, and its champions, living more and more in communities segregated from the working class, began to see violent behaviour as something situated within the slums of the burgeoning working class. In short, it made violence a social issue rooted in a particular social group. Alongside the civilized perspective was an older, customary mentality that had no qualms about legitimating violent, physical confrontation in 'fair fights' that were held in public space. It also accepted the violent establishment and maintenance of patriarchy in domestic space. Gradually, over the fifty-year period surveyed by Wood, the customary mentality was squeezed into a minority perspective. The new police helped in this process. But they were never able fully to control and domesticate all working-class districts; and equally important was the respectable working class's willing adoption of the civilized view of inter-personal violence.

- 3 Wood may, perhaps, have focused a little more on the construction of Englishness and of the stereotype of the English gentleman that seems to have inter-linked with the development of his civilized perspective. How far was this an English phenomenon? Or, at least, how far, if at all, was the English variant unique? Moreover, while Wood may be right that there was a significant shift in the construction and understanding of violence in England during this period, the recent work of Jon Lawrence has suggested the continuation of customary 'violent' politics in England until the inter-war period. Wood is generally very good on noting exceptions and nuances in his argument, but the rough-and-tumble of the hustings and of election meetings is worth some consideration and it is, unfortunately, an omission here. It may be also that his chapter on 'the brave old English custom' of fist-fighting paints a rather too noble image of the plebeian (and patrician) 'fair fight' during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But these queries should not detract from a well-researched and well-argued book, and one that should prove useful and stimulating for anyone with an interest in the topic.
- 4 A final point has to be made: this is no criticism of Wood, but he has been very poorly treated by his publisher. Charging £75.00 for a book with 147 pages of text (admittedly with a relatively small typeface) is disgraceful. And if the publisher's excuse is that it is an academic book, then why not put the notes at the bottom of the page where academics usually want them and can readily refer to them? In the present climate there are few academics with salaries that will enable them to spend that sort of money on individual books – and, at that price, the book certainly will not attract non-academics. Some university libraries in the UK will query this amount for a single history book, and so, I suspect, too will those institutions that have to pay the price when translated into euros, US dollars or whatever. And if the intention is to test the market, sell as many as possible at this ridiculous inflated price and then sell off the rest of the print run as remainders, then the publisher's money-grabbing cynicism is unworthy of him.

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